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The Bible and the Sunday School.

SUNDAY SCHOOL WORK AND HOW IT CAN BE IMPROVED.

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In response to your request I write concerning the work of the Sunday School,—not from the standpoint of a writer of lesson helps, nor as a teacher of adults, but from the point of view of a teacher of a class of boys (which privilege has been mine for several years), and as a close and frequent observer of Sunday schools.

I. THE OBJECT. The Sunday School is one of several instrumentalities by which the church teaches the Bible facts and truths, “the sword of the spirit,” through the personal power of an experienced soul in contact with those to be taught, for the purpose of leading them to choose God and a holy life as their portion, and of training them to a noble character and useful life, “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

In estimating the work of the Sunday School we must never forget that there are several other instrumentalities accomplishing the same general end, and that it is not the mission of the Sabbath School to do all the work, nor is it to be regarded as a failure if it fails to do the work of Sabbath worship, the sermon, the prayer meeting, and other meetings for the religious instruction of children, as well as its own.

I heard a man who was praising some Methodist success say that, in a prayer meeting, a Methodist began his remarks with “I am moved to say,” etc., while a Congregationalist would say, “While I’ve been sitting here I’ve been thinking,” etc. Of course the best of either denomination do both. But as between the Sabbath School and the prayer meeting, the latter lays its emphasis on “I am moved,” and the Sunday School on, “I’ve been thinking,” and the church service on both.

II. THE CHIEF DIFFICULTIES are :

1. The shortness of the time possible in the Sunday School, not exceeding thirty or forty minutes once a week.
2. The largeness of the subject, the whole Bible, especially in connection with the new light thrown upon it of late years. These two together render certain kinds of study impossible in the average class.
3. The difficulty of getting the children to study at home during the week on account of the over pressure of other studies.

4. The great diversity of age, ability and attainment in the scholars, together with irregular attendance.

5. The want of enough thoroughly trained and devoted teachers.

III. THE DEFECTS OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM grow chiefly out of the above difficulties. In order to understand them clearly it is necessary to keep in mind what are the essentials of the present system, as distinguished from the mere accessories.

The present system may be defined, in general terms, *as the uniform study by all, of the whole Bible, in chronological order, once in a number of years, alternating more or less frequently between the Old and New Testament.* It implies the inductive study of the Bible itself, and direct application to the heart and life. The length of the lessons, the number of years in a series, the number of Lesson Helps, the frequency of change, the divergence of primary and other selected classes from the scheme, the methods of study, are all incidents and not essentials.

In general, I would say that most of the practical defects are either (1) defects in the method of using and developing the system by teachers and lesson writers, and not in the system itself, or (2) grow out of conditions that cannot at once be changed, and are divergences from an ideal, impossible to be realized immediately, under the circumstances, by any possible practical system.

It is not a system for college classes, nor for select clubs, nor for those who can give much time to thorough study. I have taken Diogenes' lantern and looked everywhere I could in England and America for a better system, and I have not yet seen even the shadow of one which is better in its essential features under present conditions. I have found many valuable suggestions, but each one can grow upon the present system as naturally as an apple grows upon an apple tree, or it illustrates the couplet:

“ Poor relief it is we gain
To change the place and keep the pain.”

Still there are a number of well defined defects in the present system as commonly used.

The First Defect is the very limited, indefinite, imperfect knowledge of the Bible attained by the scholars. There is no question as to the fact. And no system can change the fact so long as the teaching is confined to a half hour a week. But there can be great improvements. The same complaint is made of our day schools. And the fact that so much fault is found with both day and Sunday Schools, is a sign of life, and a matter of encouragement. The same indefiniteness of knowledge is very wide, even among intelligent people, as to the commonest questions of government, schools and the great political questions of the day. I have made not a few tests. The answers to test questions in the *Outlook*, a year or two ago, can be paralleled almost anywhere on other subjects and among adults.

The Remedy is not to be found in a mere change of system, but under any system in—

1. A better and more definite teaching, inductive and practical.
2. A greater inspiration to home study.
3. By the learning of more facts through continued drill, and of more passages of Scripture by heart.
4. By supplemental lessons in definite catechetical form for all classes under the adult, giving general, condensed, bird's-eye views. This is absolutely necessary under any system.
5. By examinations such as are proposed by President Harper, and sent out by the American Institute of Sacred Literature, and the examinations by the English Sunday School Union.
6. By Normal classes, courses for special Bible Study, the International Bible Reading Association, University Extension courses, and similar things that awaken enthusiasm and bring opportunity for Bible study.

The Second Defect is the want of continuity in the lessons as some use them, the study of them as detached portions, what has been brightly called "the hop, skip, and jump" method.

This does not inhere in the system. It is not the lessons as planned, but the teachers that "hop, skip, and jump." I notice in the lessons for 1895 the International Lesson Committee have made an effort to avoid this danger by suggesting a whole section of which the lesson is the centre, section to be joined to section in a continuous history, as they have all along intended the teachers to do, as some of us lesson writers have done for years.

This defect is very great. And whenever any one who has so studied the Bible first takes each portion as a part of a whole history, or a complete life of Christ, and sees each part in its relations to the whole, it comes to him almost like a new revelation.

I am sure that the best scheme for Bible study in the Sunday School must include the whole Bible. In my earlier pastorate the Sunday Schools could not be got out of the Gospels and the Acts, with an occasional glimpse of Genesis. Most of the Bible was an unknown book except to those of us who were compelled to read it through at home, and to those who in the primary school studied the biblical catechisms. It was far from an ideal system. We ought to go through the Bible in the school as we travel through a country, stopping at the points of greatest interest, and making them centres of study for the whole, while glancing out of the windows, or from the deck of the steamer, at all intervening portions.

The higher criticism has helped us much in giving us these broader and more comprehensive views. Most of the questions it raises cannot be discussed in the younger classes, and may take up too much time in the older ones. But we can guard our scholars against basing their belief in the Bible on any theory of the literary form of the Bible, lest, if it fails them, the temple of their faith and hope, being built upon the sand, should fall with it.

The Third Defect grows out of the attempt to teach uniform lessons to scholars of all ages and all degrees of intelligence and culture. It is perfectly plain that some of the scholars cannot, on this plan, have the lessons ideally best for them. The same difficulty arises in every graded day school. Yet I believe that it is impossible to have the best and most effective work done without uniform lessons, with some exceptions, to be mentioned later. To abolish uniform lessons is, in some respects, to set the hands on the Sunday School dial back twenty-five years. There can be no real advanced step that does not retain general uniformity. It greatly helps the home teaching ; it aids the teacher in his preparation ; it concentrates many other rays of light upon the same passage ; it makes teachers' meetings possible ; it brings the topic into frequent conversation. To give up uniformity is worse than to burn up the barn to get rid of the rats. There are better ways. The ideal school will therefore—

1. Have a uniform system for the main school.
2. The school will be graded into several departments.
3. The grading for the main school will be one of graded lessons and helps on uniform topics, the points being taken which are especially adapted to each class. This grading can be done as effectively in most cases as if different Bible verses were selected, and almost as perfectly as the grading in our day schools. Indeed, much of the grading in the day schools is of this character.
4. There will be certain of the adult classes which will take turns in temporarily taking up special fields of study, or books of the Bible, or normal lessons, in a kind of post-graduate course. This has always been done in some of the large schools which most believe in the uniform lessons.
5. The primary department will either have a double course, one on the International lessons and one of its own, or will have a course especially adapted to its own needs.

The Fourth Defect of the present system lies in its apparent inflexibility. It is not wise always to do the same thing. That this defect is not inherent in the system is shown by the fact that the present course is for only six years instead of the seven hitherto adhered to, and we are now taking up the life of Christ in chronological order.

I do not see why a greater variety might not be an advantage. After having been over the Bible once or twice in a seven years' course, why not go through it once in a three years' course. After alternating each year between the Old and the New Testaments, why not take a two years' course in the New Testament history. Then go back again to the seven or eight years' course, which, on the whole, is the best.

A Fifth Defect, frequently referred to by certain critics, is the want of sufficient training in many of the teachers we are compelled to employ. This, however, adheres to every system that can be used in the Sunday School. However, I think that the criticism is over-done. The facts are not as bad as frequently represented. For the work to be accomplished, the teachers will

average very high, as high as the majority of teachers in the common schools of our country; indeed, many of them are the same. I cannot agree with Professor Briggs in his statements about Sunday School teachers in the *North American Review*. Mr. Jacobs has said that the Lord has skimmed the cream of the churches and put it into the Sunday School. I am inclined to go further, and believe that by the Sunday School teaching he turns even the skim-milk into cream; such a large proportion of the Bible study being in connection with preparation for teaching. Large classes, except for adults and primary classes, are not so good either for the church or the children, who need the personal close contact of earnest, intelligent souls with their own, and many of whom learn very little in a large class, under the circumstances of our Sunday School teaching. But that our teachers need much more training than they receive, and, that one of the great lines of progress in the future will be in this direction, is perfectly clear.

Of course the above are not all the defects that can easily be seen. However, they do not belong to this system more than to others. I wish to end as I began, with the results of all the researches I have been able to make, (1) that in its essential features, for the main school, the present system of uniform lessons has great advantages over every other so far suggested; (2) that it naturally and easily absorbs and makes a part of itself nearly every suggested improvement (as, for instance, the Inductive studies of President Harper, Professor Willis J. Beecher and others in the former *Old and New Testament Student*, now improved into THE BIBLICAL WORLD); (3) that our great effort should be to retain all its advantages, cure all its defects, and adopt all improvements.

And (4) to this end we should not oppose, but welcome every experiment and every effort to discover better things, and bid God speed to all the prophets who see the possibilities of the future, and are taking "advanced steps" toward their realization. The learned man wanted "I die learning" on his tomb stone. The Sunday School will have no tomb stone if its motto is "I live learning."

F. N. P.